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ABSTRACT

Senior citizens between the ages 60-72 most want to attend a community college according to a series of interviews among 100 members 60 years and older, of Seattle, Washington-based senior centers. A semantic differential technique evaluated the concepts of community college, classroom and senior center. Members evaluated the concept "community college" as neutral, while the concepts of "senior center" and "classroom" were beneficial, although they indicated that they were likely to want to attend community college. Ninety-three percent of those who had prior college experience said they would attend. The overall results appear to support the maxim that education tends to beget more education. (Author/BE)

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# An Approach to Curriculum Development: Interfacing Senior Centers and Community Colleges

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ABSTRACT

One hundred members, 50 years of age or older, of Seattle, Washington-based senior citizen centers were interviewed. A semantic differential technique was used to evaluate the concepts of community college, classroom and senior center. The results indicated that members evaluated the concept, "community college" as neutral, whereas the concepts, "senior center" and "classroom" were evaluated as beneficial.

The results also indicated that members were likely to desire attendance at a community college. Ninety-three percent of those who had prior college experiences said they would attend. The overall results appear to support the maxim that education tends to beget more education.

As of 1975, memberships in senior centers ranged from one to five percent of the total people who were eligible to join (Atchley, 1976; National Council on Aging, 1975). The rate of participation in higher education programs by the older cohort in higher education fall within this same range (Academy for Educational Development, 1974). Concomitantly, evidence from population studies indicate that the actual numbers of the older cohort in our society are increasing (Sheldon and Tibbits, 1958; U.S. Bureau of Census, 1972). Along with this finding, data from other studies demonstrate that the overall educational level of all groups of people in our society is increasing. Thus, it is reasonable to expect that the number of senior citizens participating in programs will increase, and this very probably will be due to the overall rise in educational levels. The proportions of participating elderly will also rise. Many leaders express the opinion that community colleges will be the major educational recipients of the increase in that sector of our population due to a number of unique characteristics.

Little is known about the psychosocial factors that influence senior members who are attracted to senior citizen centers and the relationship of these factors to

potential participation in community college programs. Community colleges and senior citizen centers possess several attributes in common: (1) both provide for each accessibility, (2) both have voluntary affiliation procedures, (3) both provide for expressive/instrumental functions, and (4) both account for a relatively small proportion of the population of elderly. However, some major differences also exist. In most instances, due to their greater number and location, senior centers are more readily accessible. Senior citizen centers serve only the elderly, whereas community colleges serve adults of all ages, and, as a result, have been more responsive to the physical infirmities of the elderly in planning programs and physical arrangements. A major difference has been the lack of stress-producing situations, such as grades, in senior centers.

Knowledge of those factors which attract senior citizens to higher education, along with knowledge of the characteristics of elderly who are attracted, should be valuable for community college administrators, faculty and trustees in planning. Thus, curricula designed for the older cohort could go beyond the simple wants and needs studies, and could include content and process appropriate to those persons community colleges are now attracting.

## The Sample

The sample consisted of 100 people, 60 years of age and older, who were on one of the membership lists of the six senior centers administered by Seattle Services and Centers. The sample was drawn using a table of random numbers from the approximately 3,000 members. Thirty-eight percent of the persons selected refused to take part in the study. The mean age was 72.8 years with a range of 61 to 93. Females constituted 76 percent of the sample; males 24 percent. The ethnic distribution was predominantly White, with 8 percent Black.

## Construct Validity

Directors of the Seattle Senior Citizen Centers and colleagues at the University of Washington were used as a panel of experts to review the first and second drafts of the interview instrument. Following their critiques, a small, pilot study was conducted using six subjects drawn from the same pool as the study sample. The final document which guided the interviews consisted of 96 questions. Only the antecedent variables, the semantic concepts, and college interest questions are discussed in the present paper.

## Assessment Procedures

Interviews were conducted in private rooms at each of the six centers. Interview appointments were made at the convenience of the participant. When the respondent arrived for the interview, the investigator introduced himself and each person was invited to be seated next to the investigator. Anonymity was assured each respondent. To ensure comprehension, a copy of the interview schedule was given to each person while the investigator read the questions to the participant and recorded responses. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes, with a range of 20 minutes to 55 minutes. A signed copy of a consent form was given to each participant at the completion of the interview.

## Research Questions

The interviews dealt with the senior citizen's past and present collegiate experience and their interest in attending a community college. In addition, they were asked to evaluate three concepts: Community College, Senior Center and Classroom, using certain bi-polar adjective scales. In order to assess senior citizens's interest in community colleges, a series of five questions were administered.

Desire to Attend Community Colleges

A series of five related questions were asked in order to assess the member's interest in and propensity toward attending or studying at a community college.

Question 1. Would you like to attend a community college? Approximately 30 percent of the respondents reported a desire to attend a community college. Slightly over 50 percent replied in the negative and 19 percent were undecided. While a significantly larger proportion of respondents signified no interest in attending college, the fact that over 30 percent were interested in attending a community college would seem to indicate a rather significant need. Graney and Hays's (1976) study asked a similar question of elderly residents in Wichita, Kansas. Responses to "would you like to take classes if you could" found 26 percent affirmative, 70 percent negative and 4 percent undecided. They concluded that this indicated a relatively strong interest in higher education. Their results are comparable with those in the present study.

TABLE 1

RESPONSE TO THE QUESTION:
"WOULD YOU LIKE TO GO TO A COMMUNITY COLLEGE?"
BY SEX OF RESPONDENT

| Response | Male (Number) | Female (Number) | Number (Total) | Percentage (Total) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Yes | 3 | 27 | 30 | 30.3 |
| No | 15 | 35 | 50 | 50.5 |
| Maybe | 6 | 13 | 19 | 19.2 |
| | | | n = 99 | 100.0% |

$\chi^2 = 4.77284$, df = 2, $p = .0920$

TABLE 2

DISTRIBUTION OF HIGHER EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE BY SEX

| Type of College | Male (Number) | Female (Number) | Number (Total) | Percentage (Total) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| A community college | 2 | 5 | 7 | 7.1 |
| A four-year college | 1 | 6 | 7 | 7.1 |
| A university | 3 | 17 | 20 | 20.2 |
| Other categories | 2 | 12 | 14 | 14.1 |
| Never attended college | 16 | 35 | 51 | 51.5 |
| | 24 | 75 | n = 99 | 100.0% |

Twenty eight, or 93.3% of the respondents who gave "yes" responses had prior college experiences. Twenty one, or 76.6% of the individuals in the "yes" category were less than 72 years of age. Thirty four or 70% of the "no" category were in the greater than 72 year old group. Thus it was not surprising to obtain a significant Chi-square between age and the variable assessing college desire ($X^2$ = 15.4665, df = 2, p = .0004). The distribution of responses by the sex of the respondent resulted in a Chi-square that was significant at the .10 level.

Question 2. "Have you ever attended a college?" Seven percent of the sample reported previous attendance at a community college while another 40% reported they had attended other colleges and universities (see Table 2). Approximately 52% reported they had never attended college previously. The mean date of last attendance was 1942 and the median year of last attendance was 1935. Two thirds of the women in the sample indicated previous college attendance as contrasted to only one third of the men respondents. Of those who had attended college, 75% were not married and 70.8 lived alone. The relatively large percentage of the sample with past college experience appeared unusually high when compared with the

national Louis Harris data on senior citizens (Havighurst, 1976).

Question 3. "Do you now attend any college?" Ninety-seven persons reported they were not currently attending any institution of higher education. One male was attending a university on a part-time basis and one female was attending a local proprietary school (see Table 3). These same two individuals reported prior attendance at college, however, it should be noted that these two persons were undecided when asked if they would like to attend a community college. This percentage was of the same magnitude as the 1975-76 enrollment data for the State of Washington's Community College System.

Question 4. Negative responses significantly outnumbered the positive ones for the question: "Would you attend a community college if a close personal friend asked you to do so?" Members of the sample who had prior college experience were not polled, so the effective rate of "yes" responses among the 52 respondents amounted to 25.0% (see Table 4). This appears to be a low rate when compared to the other studies concerned with factors which impell persons toward joining voluntary associations (Babchuk & Gordon, 1962).

TABLE 3

FREQUENCY DISTRIBUTION OF RESPONDENTS CURRENTLY ATTENDING A COLLEGE

| Current Status | Male | Female | Number | Percent |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Not attending | 23 | 74 | 97 | 98.0 |
| University | 1 | -- | 1 | 1.0 |
| Proprietary school | -- | 1 | 1 | 1.0 |
| | | | n = 99 | 100.0% |

TABLE 4

FREQUENCY DISTRIBUTION OF RESPONSES BY SEX TO THE QUESTION:
WOULD YOU ATTEND A COLLEGE IF A CLOSE PERSONAL FRIEND ASKED YOU TO DO SO?

| Response | Male | Female | Totals | Effective Percent* |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Yes | 2 | 11 | 13 | 25 |
| No | 13 | 26 | 39 | 75 |
| Refused to answer | 1 | -- | 1 | < 1 |
| Prior college experience | 9 | 38 | 46 | N/A |
| | 24 | 75 | n = 99 | 100% |

*Percentage calculated on those never attending, n = 52.

Those with past college experience were not asked about their attendance at the invitation of a friend.

Respondents less than 72 years of age constituted 69% of the "yes" responses. Eight of the women were widows, lived alone and reported high rates of visits to their senior centers. The two men were married and also were frequent visitors to a center. All 13 "yes" replies also reported that they had voted in the 1976 presidential election.

Question 5. The responses to the question: "If you were to attend a community college, what age group of classmates would you prefer?" indicated that a majority (56.6%) of the study sample desired a mixed age group (see Table 5). The next most preferred age group was the aged 60 and older which was chosen by 13 women and 7 men.

The semantic differential technique devised by Osgood, Suci, and Tannenbaum (1967) was employed in examining perceptions of three concepts, "classroom," "senior center" and "community college."

This study investigated the question: "Do members of a senior citizen center evaluate the concepts "classroom," senior center," and "community college" similarily? Twelve bipolar adjectives were chosen from the evalu-

TABLE 5

FREQUENCY DISTRIBUTION OF RESPONSES TO THE QUESTIONS:
WHAT AGE GROUP WOULD YOU PREFER YOUR CLASSMATES TO BE?
TABULATED BY SEX OF RESPONDENT

| Age Preferred Category (Years) | Male (Number) | Female | Number (Total) | Percent (Total) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 18-25 group | 0 | 4 | 4 | 4.0 |
| 26-35 group | 2 | 6 | 8 | 8.1 |
| 36-49 group | 3 | 3 | 6 | 6.1 |
| 50-59 group | 1 | 4 | 5 | 5.1 |
| 60 and older | 7 | 13 | 20 | 20.2 |
| Mixed age group | 11 | 45 | 56 | 56.6 |
| | 24 | 75 | n = 99 | 100.0% |

TABLE 6

SCALE ITEMS USED FOR THE THREE CONCEPTS AND THEIR LOADING ON THE EVALUATIVE FACTOR FORM (OSGOOD, SUCI, AND TANNENBAUM (1967)

| Scales | Factor Loading |
|---|---|
| Good - Bad | 1.00 |
| Beneficial - Harmful | Not Given - Related to Good/Bad |
| Sociable - Unsociable | .42 |
| Friendly - Unfriendly | Not Given - Related to Sociable/ Unsociable |
| Kind - Cruel | .52 |
| Clean - Dirty | .45 |
| Pleasant - Painful | .37 |
| Beautiful - Ugly | .52 |
| Reputable - Disreputable | .68 |
| Wise - Foolish | .57 |
| Educated - Ignorant | Not Given - Related to Wise/ Foolish |
| Known - Unknown | Not Given |

ative factors and subjects rated concepts on a seven point scale. (These are included in Table 6.) The sample numbers differ for each comparison since this was the final phase of the interview and some of the subjects did not complete the semantic differential scale for the three concepts due to their announced fatique.

In Table 7 are included the means, standard deviations, and t-test values for the three concepts which are paired for analysis. On a seven point scale, a mean rating of four would fall at the mid-point between the bipolar adjectives. A higher mean rating in the present study indicates a more positive perception of a concept while a rating less than four would fall toward a negative view. Thus, all three concepts were on the positive side in mean ratings with senior center the highest in the subject's perceptions.

The rather neutral ratings received by the concept "community college" may be accounted in part to a lack of knowledge on the part of the respondents since their evaluation of the scale pair, known/unknown, for the concept "community college" yielded significantly lower mean scores than for "senior center."

Summary Findings on College Interest

Subject variables of sex, marital status, occupation, and retirement income, were found independent of the responses given to the five questions which probed community college interest. However, the age of the senior citizen was associated with the desire to attend a community college. The cross-tabulation between those who had ever attended college by the desire to attend a community college was also related.

The results indicated that senior citizens between ages 60-72 were most likely to desire attendance at a community college. Those who had prior college experiences were also most likely to indicate a desire to attend a community college.

Ninety-three percent of the positive responses were given by persons who had reported prior college enrollment.

Twenty-five percent of those respondents who never had attended college said they would be influenced to attend if a close personal friend asked them to. These results appear to support the maxim that education tends to beget more education.

The semantic differential also lends further evidence to show that senior citizens may lack sufficient

TABLE 7

TABULATED STATISTICS FOR THE COMPUTED VARIABLE FROM THE SEMANTIC DIFFERENTIAL: COMMUNITY COLLEGE, CLASSROOM AND SENIOR CENTER

| Variables | Classroom | Senior Center | Community College | Classroom | Community College | Senior Center |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Number of cases | 64 | | 63 | | 76 | |
| Mean | 71.31 | 75.09 | 64.46 | 71.25 | 55.76 | 73.10 |
| Standard deviation | 9.708 | 7.706 | 21.87 | 9.775 | 29.32 | 12.34 |
| Standard error | 1.214 | .963 | 2.756 | 1.232 | 3.364 | 1.416 |
| Correlation | .555* | | .153 (ns)[1] | | .205 (ns)[1] | |
| t-Value | -3.61 | | -2.39 | | -5.14 | |
| df | 63 | | 62 | | 75 | |
| 2-Tailed Probability | .001 | | .020 | | .001 | |

*2-Tailed Probability

[1]Not significant

knowledge about community colleges to give a truly reliable answer to the question of desire to attend a community college.

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